

Harvard Corporation demands graduate workers pay the price for Trump's assault on academic freedom

Mike Ingram
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The strike by 4,000 graduate student workers at Harvard University that began April 21 takes place under conditions of an ongoing assault on academic freedom and other democratic rights. As the Trump administration launches a scorched-earth campaign to bring higher education under the direct ideological control of the far right, Harvard's leadership has responded not by forcefully defending democratic principles but by offloading the costs of its political conflict with Trump onto academic workers, including striking members of the Harvard Graduate Student Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW).

Harvard Corporation is seeking to restructure the university into a more efficient arm of the imperialist state and finance capital, using the threat of state-driven financial strangulation as a pretext to crush labor militancy and campus dissent.

The Trump administration has deployed its cabinet of reactionaries to execute a multi-pronged assault. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has terminated all professional military education and fellowships at Harvard, labeling the school a "red-hot center of Hate America activism." Simultaneously, Education Secretary Linda McMahon has placed Harvard under "heightened cash monitoring" and is threatening its 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. The administration has frozen \$2.2 billion in multi-year grants and \$60 million in multi-year contract value, while Trump himself has threatened to pursue \$1 billion in "damages" over the university's failure to suppress campus protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Utilizing the Department of Education, the state is demanding an audit of "viewpoint diversity" and the total liquidation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs. These "civil rights" pretexts are a transparent cover to force the university to align its research and hiring with the administration's ultra-right ideology, effectively ending academic freedom.

Prior to being removed by Trump, DHS Secretary Kristi

Noem threatened to revoke Harvard's ability to enroll international students, weaponizing student visas to force the university to report "illegal and violent activities"—a euphemism for anti-war protests—directly to federal authorities.

Rather than resisting this fascistic overreach, the Harvard Corporation is using these threats to justify a brutal retrenchment, signaling to workers that they must pay the price for the university's survival as a capitalist enterprise.

The Harvard administration has weaponized the narrative of "financial distress" to justify wage suppression and austerity. Citing a projected \$365 million deficit in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), the university pleads poverty while sitting on a mountain of gold, including a \$53.2 billion endowment. This "deficit" is a political fiction, a strategic accounting maneuver designed to facilitate a class-driven transfer of wealth from the workers who perform the essential labor of instruction to the endowment fund managed by the oligarchy.

Graduate student workers are fighting for raises that keep up with inflation in one of the most expensive US cities. As of 2026 estimates, the median monthly rent of a one-bedroom home in Cambridge is around \$3,500. Teaching Fellows at Harvard earn between \$18 and \$21 per hour, and many qualify for state food assistance. Harvard has countered with an insulting 2.5 percent annual raise.

While the university claims it cannot afford a living wage, it raised record-breaking sums in current-use gifts last year. The "crisis" is not one of scarcity but of distribution. This transfer of wealth is overseen by a specific university "Committee of Capital" whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the working class.

The Harvard Corporation is a superstructural institution, where the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy and the imperialist state are fused. Its members do not manage a "community of scholars." Rather, they manage an ideological production facility as an extension of their

corporate portfolios.

The Democratic Party offers no alternative to Trump's assault. President Alan Garber and the Harvard administration represent the same layer of the ruling class that, under the Biden administration, initiated the work of criminalizing student dissent by slandering anti-genocide protesters as "antisemites."

An analysis by the *World Socialist Web Site* of the members of the Harvard Corporation, the governing body of the Ivy League school, revealed a veritable Who's Who of America's corporate-financial oligarchy and military-intelligence establishment. This includes Mariano-Florentino (Tino) Cuéllar, who served in three Democratic administrations at the White House and federal agencies, including as senior director of the National Security Council under President Obama. During this time, Obama directed "Terror Tuesday" drone assassinations, including of US citizens, the bloody regime change operations in Libya and Syria and the 2014 coup in Ukraine that paved the way for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

The Democrats have functioned as Trump's enablers fearing above anything else a movement of the working class and students against the fascist president, which escapes their control and challenges the interests of the ruling class, which they defend just as violently as the Republicans.

When Columbia University made a deal with the Trump administration, the Democrats were largely silent. Columbia's capitulation stood in stark contrast to the views of the vast majority of students and faculty, many of whom had taken courageous action against dictatorship and war, risking their academic careers and personal safety.

The UAW bureaucracy is in a de facto alliance with Trump based on economic nationalism. Despite periodic rhetoric about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and cuts to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other federal funding, voiced by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) members in his PR department, UAW President Shawn Fain has simultaneously collaborated with the Biden and Trump administrations. He has promoted the UAW as a partner in "rebuilding American industry," including advocating tariff and trade policies that subordinate international worker solidarity to national capitalist interests.

Fain publicly backed Trump's tariffs and framed the union as a force to defend "American" jobs, going so far as to embrace the idea of the UAW serving wartime production needs. This amounts to endorsing the subordination of labor to state military aims and to corporate profit-making during a crisis, rather than organizing independent worker resistance to war.

The international union has done nothing to defend students. UAW Region 9A, led by Shawn Fain crony and DSA member Brandon Mancilla, ordered the local at Columbia to water down its political demands. When workers refused, the apparatus threatened to place the local under trusteeship. Despite two overwhelming votes to authorize strike action, the UAW has refused to sanction a walkout.

The defense of educational freedoms can be secured only through the independent actions of the working class. It is significant that Harvard workers are fighting for not only higher wages but advancing directly political demands. Workers are demanding a stop to ICE repression and opposing the integration of the university into the military-intelligence apparatus. The strike must become a focus for an offensive of the entire working class in the protection of democratic rights and academic freedom.

This is only possible through the building a network of rank-and-file committees that unite academic workers across the country with autoworkers in Detroit, Toledo and other cities and broader sections of the working class.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist and anti-war candidate for UAW president, recently called on all UAW members to back the Harvard strikers, saying, "Your walkout is part of a growing movement of workers and young people in the United States and internationally who are entering into struggle against exploitation, repression and war."

Harvard graduate students can only take their struggle forward in a rebellion against the UAW apparatus, which functions as the "labor lieutenant" of Harvard Corporation and the corporate and political establishment.

This is underscored by the sabotage by the UAW-aligned Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) leadership, which has already pushed through a sellout one-year contract featuring a flat \$2,300 raise. In one of the world's most expensive places to live, this amounts to a real-wage cut. The WSWS has called on rank-and-file workers to reject the one-year deal in the vote scheduled for May 12-13 and unite in a common fight with striking graduate students.

The success of the Harvard strike depends on breaking the grip of the UAW bureaucracy and the two capitalist political parties. Graduate workers must seize control of their own struggle through the formation of a rank-and-file committee.



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